

TOURISM INTELLIGENCE CORNER

From
Image to
Experience

If images are worth a thousand words, then quality experiences are speechless and simply unforgettable. Destination experiences and the quality of these so called 'brand experiences' are increasingly regarded as the final bastion for sustaining competitive advantage and building profitable customer relationships.

Whereas product quality and service quality reigned in the 80's and 90's, today quality of experience is the 'king of kings'. In order to assess the "Experiential Quality" (EQ) of Aruba, an in-depth assessment was conducted between 2005 and 2007.

What's your
Destination EQ?

The study first identified a series of factors that influence EQ ranging from *hospitality-specific factors*, such as quality of accommodation, quality of service, value for money, and friendliness to *destination-specific factors*, ranging from restaurants, nightlife, safety, and shopping, to culture, scenery, tours and activities.

Besides specific factors, three generic factors form the foundation of the destination experience, and include sea, sun and sand, which are often shared across Caribbean and other tropical island destinations, and do not provide any sustainable or differential source of quality

Overall, the findings indicate that Aruba has a relatively good EQ with an average of 3.6 (or a 72% average), as measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (=terrible) to 5 (=excellent). Top rated factors are *beaches* (4.1) and *friendliness of people* (4.1), showing an increase of almost 20% compared to 2006. Other factors that were evaluated as good include, *weather* (3.9), *restaurants* (3.8), *quality of service* (3.8), and *quality of accommodation* (3.7), showing no significant change relative to 2006.

On the other hand, factors that scored 'average' include *exotic atmosphere* (3.5), *shopping experiences* (3.5), *quality and variety of cultural attractions and heritage activities* (3.5) and *perceived value for money* (3.4). Likewise, factors that scored good in 2007, but were rated lower compared to 2006, include *scenery and natural beauty* (-13%), *exotic atmosphere* (-9%), and *feeling of safety* (-10%).

Thus while Aruba certainly provides a good visitor experience, and excels at 'sea, sun, sand, and service', caution and care are required for an atmosphere which is increasingly less experienced as exotic, safe, culturally-sophisticated, scenic and stunning.

Comparative EQ

With over 70% of Aruban tourists visiting other Caribbean destinations, the study explored their perception of Aruba in comparison to their previous Caribbean vacation. Destinations that were most visited by tourists include destinations ranging from Bahamas and Jamaica to the Dominican Republic and Mexico, followed by Puerto Rico, St. Maarten, St. Thomas, Barbados, Cayman Islands and Bermuda.

From a visitor perspective, Aruba finds itself in an interesting mix of competitors, basically competing with different strategies, which makes the sustainability of competitiveness increasingly challenging.

Visitors indicate that the 'Aruba' experience is (much) better than Caymans, Jamaica, Bahamas and Mexico (more than 60%), and is somewhat comparable to St. Maarten, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (between 40% and 60%).

In the view of visitors, Bermuda, Barbados and St. Thomas provide a better quality vacation experience. Interestingly enough, some of the differentiating destination factors mentioned by tourists include shopping experiences, perceived value for money, scenery and culture.

Improving the X-Factor

The findings indicate that the quality of the 'Aruba' experience is good. The question remains of course if 'good' is good enough, particularly as our environment becomes increasingly turbulent, international competition increases, and our 'destination architecture' ages and loses 'flexible stamina'.

But imagine if simply good isn't good enough. How then do we go from good to great? How does Aruba increase its destination "X-factor" in terms of experience, excellence, and exclusiveness?



A strength-based approach suggests maintaining and improving standards in terms of *sea, sand and service*, and simultaneously, building and developing the areas of *safety, scenery*, and (socio-cultural) *sophistication*. These latter 3S factors are imperative to the sustainable EQ of Aruba.

To conclude, while images come and go, experiences last a lifetime. Ultimately, we are in the business of fulfilling dreams, and creating the unforgettable and everlasting...

Ps. And if we can make a couple of billion in due process, all the merrier....

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